THE CANBERRA COMMISSION: PATHS FOLLOWED, PATHS AHEAD[1]

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Introduction

The Australian Labor government's key initiative to address the issues of nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation, the Canberra Commission on the Elimination of Nuclear Weapons, was launched at a time when the period of great advances in international arms control was already drawing to a close. Between 1987 and 1995 the international community had witnessed an unprecedented level of activity in the arms control field. During this period we saw the negotiation of the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty, the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaties (START I and II), the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) and the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review and Extension Conference (NPTREC). Much of this era was marked also by the nuclear weapons states' self-imposed moratorium on nuclear testing. Within a few months of the 1995 NPTREC however, and after two of the nuclear weapons states had resumed testing, it became clear that while negotiations towards the next great hurdle for arms control - a Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) - looked promising, it was by no means assured that the CTBT would enjoy a smooth passage into international law. These fears were confirmed when India, long opposed to the inequality of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), and on whose signature the CTBT depended initially, refused to accede to the test ban provisions in 1996. Although the CTBT document was eventually salvaged by creative diplomatic footwork by Australia and hailed as another milestone in the great advance of arms control, the atmosphere had undoubtedly soured.

With the dawning reality that despite its successful negotiation, the CTBT could never enter in force until India (and Pakistan) had signed and ratified it, it became evident that arms control had reached an impasse and that the achievements of the previous nine or so years could not easily be matched by new agreements.[2] Moreover, the fact that START II had not been ratified and the Conference on Disarmament (CD) had been

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[1] The title is adapted from a recent paper written by John English on the Canadian initiative to ban anti-personnel land mines: the so-called Ottawa treaty process (English 1998). Like the Ottawa treaty, the Canberra Commission was an exercise in creative, middle power arms control diplomacy, and one whose ultimate path will depend on full support from its sponsoring state.

[2] The one exception has been the 1997 Ottawa Treaty banning anti-personnel landmines – itself the product of Canada's frustration with the negotiating climate in traditional arms control bodies (see English 1998; Axworthy and Taylor 1998).

unable to reach agreement on the numerous issues facing it all indicated that the golden era of arms control achievements was over and that it was now being replaced by a period of deep pessimism about the prospects for arms control and disarmament (Müller 1998; Walker 1998). Nothing made this more evident however, than the eruption of the nuclear crisis in South Asia in May 1998.

The Canberra Commission initiative, by appearing at the very end of the period of great success (the Commission's Report was published in August 1996) was not therefore blessed with an auspicious birth. Yet its prospects were not marred merely by the timing of its arrival, coinciding as this did with the onset of what has been termed the 'great frustration' in arms control efforts (Walker 1998). There was at least one other reason why the Commission's Report has not enjoyed the recognition and impact that it might otherwise have received. The change of government in Australia before the Commission was able to complete its Report meant that it was not promoted and pursued as its original political sponsors had planned.

This paper argues that despite its inauspicious start and virtual abandonment by the new Coalition government in Australia, the Canberra Commission Report nevertheless continued to attract international attention in arms control and disarmament circles. Largely because of its respected authorship and its cautious step-by-step approach, it has been incorporated into the non-proliferation and elimination debates, stands as a core reference point in these debates and has sparked a number of related initiatives. This quiet but steady accumulation of interest in the Report's findings and recommendations (at the discursive level if not the policy-implementation level) together with the severe disruption to the non-proliferation regime posed by the South Asian tests, has meant that the Report is currently well-placed to move the disarmament debate forwards. The South Asian crisis naturally requires effective addressing of the specific politico-strategic factors present in that region.[3] It is argued here, however, that attempts to contain or reverse proliferation must be accompanied by a recognition that India and Pakistan will not curb their nuclear ambitions unless existing nuclear powers also take steps towards nuclear elimination. In this sense, the Canberra Commission Report may be the most comprehensive and credible set of proposals currently available for addressing, within a global context, the recently renewed dangers of nuclear proliferation. [4]

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[3] There were a number of specific reasons why these states tested when they did. The long-running yet latent, or 'opaque' nuclear rivalry which existed on the Subcontinent is discussed in Hagerty (1995-96; 1998), Chellaney (1993) and Joeck (1997). For analyses of the implications of the May 1998 tests see Singh (1998), Thakur (1998a, 1998b) and Walker (1998).

[4] We are not arguing here that the Report in itself could have prevented the South Asian tests. Even had the existiing nuclear weapons states been moving seriously towards disarmament, there was no absolute guarantee that India and Pakistan would have refrained from testing in 1998. We do suggest, however (echoing the Report) that continuing to maintain the nuclear *status quo* can only encourage would-be proliferators. Conversely, if the world was to move to a position of 'zero' nuclear weapons, states such as India and Pakistan would have probably been far more cautious in their calculations to test; had they proceeded in such a climate, the international community would have been able to exercise far greater condemnation and retaliation than it was able to do in the climate where the possession of nuclear weapons by some states is seen as acceptable.

In order to support this claim the paper will first trace the origins of the Canberra Commission initiative as a non-traditional and innovative exercise in arms control diplomacy by a leading middle power. It will then survey the progress of the Report after its unfortunately-timed birth and assess its preliminary impact at the international level, before examining more recent initiatives in the UN and by other states to advance the Commission's findings. Finally, this analysis suggests that reconvening the Canberra Commission would be a timely and appropriate response to current nuclear crises and uncertainties, providing Australia with an opportunity to contribute further to the twin security goals of non-proliferation and disarmament.

The Origins of the Canberra Commission

The Canberra Commission had its origins in the convergence of both international and domestic political considerations of the time. Australia's history of activist middle power diplomacy and the evidence of political and popular attitudes against nuclear weapons reinforced this convergence. The most immediate catalyst for the formation of the Canberra Commission, however, came from the Australian public's reaction to the announcement of the resumption of French nuclear testing in the South Pacific in June 1995. The official Australian response, at first relatively mild, became much more forceful as the Australian Labor government sought to channel both domestic and regional resentment against the nuclear tests into a campaign of diplomatic and moral pressure against the French government (Nossal and Vivian 1997). Yet while the Canberra Commission can be seen as an immediate political response to the French tests, it should also be noted that the idea of a creative, new approach appears to have been in gestation even prior to the tests.[5] The need to respond forcefully and effectively to widespread concerns in the Australian and regional community was a key element of Prime Minister Keating's initiative, but it was not the only consideration. To suggest that convening the Commission was an exercise solely in placating an angry electorate prior to the upcoming Federal election oversimplifies the origins of the idea and ignores the intellectual and political efforts invested in arms control and disarmament by the Labor government before 1995.

Moreover, and in line with his 'big picture' approach to policy issues, Keating recognised that the main point was not that the French had initiated yet another round of testing, but rather that their actions went against a widespread public perception that nuclear weapons were no longer appropriate to the post-Cold War environment. In this sense, the official policy response to French testing, while necessary, became for Keating a sterile and unproductive process of reaction and criticism. It was the need to come up with a

[5] Private correspondence with senior foreign policy adviser to Keating (10 September 1998) and interviews with DFATand PM and C staff (Canberra, 9-10 October 1997). While the actual Canberra Commission proposal emerged from Keating's office and the PM and C, Gareth Evans had noted, at least a year before the French tests, that the post-Cold War environment was ripe for initiatives favouring elimination and had explicitly argued the case for a nuclear weapon free world (Evans and Grant 1995: 86-87).

more creative policy response to the whole question of the role of nuclear weapons in the post-Cold War era that lay at the heart of the Canberra Commission proposal.

The evolution of a nuclear elimination debate at the international level reinforced this. By the end of 1995 the debate was beginning to shift in important directions in Washington. In particular, around the same time as the Keating government was beginning to focus its attention on an appropriate response to the question of nuclear weapons, two highly respected organisations – the Henry L. Stimson Center and the Federation of American Scientists (FAS) – began making a more concerted challenge to the orthodoxy in US foreign policy circles which claimed that nuclear weapons elimination was an undesirable and in any case unachievable goal. Drawing on the increasingly optimistic outlook for arms control and disarmament negotiations that emerged after the end of the Cold War, these two organisations adopted a program of piecing together the strategic and political arguments against the continued possession of nuclear weapons. In February 1995 the Stimson Center released the first of its annual Steering Committee Reports on nuclear weapons elimination, titled *Beyond the Nuclear Peril*.[6] The Report was the product of a consultation process involving senior members of the Center as well as a number of former and serving officials. Its principal focus was developing the argument against the continuing utility of nuclear weapons in terms of influencing US foreign and defence policy, but it also made important strides in drawing together emerging arguments about steps needed to progress the elimination cause globally. Similarly, the FAS was conducting a campaign of pressuring the Clinton administration on the importance of taking concrete steps towards reducing the dangers of nuclear weapons.[7] These external developments undoubtedly shaped the Keating government's view that a bold policy initiative on the nuclear question was now needed.[8]

The initial reaction to the announcement of the Canberra Commission in October 1995 was mixed. The opposition Coalition dismissed it as a 'political stunt' but agreed to let the Commission run its course if it was elected. Critics described the policy as an "empty and worthless gesture" designed only to placate the Left and minor parties in the context of a looming Federal election campaign (Sheridan 1995). In contrast, others saw the Commission as a creative and intelligent diplomatic initiative which would have significant flow-on effects for the CTBT and the future of the nuclear non-proliferation regime (Stewart 1995). This short-lived debate produced more heat than light. Indeed, the Canberra Commission received less attention when it was first announced than did other aspects of the government's nuclear disarmament agenda at the time. The Commission was just one element of a twelve-point plan announced by Keating as part of the UN

[6] All three Stimson Center Steering Committee Reports can be found at http://www.stimson.org.
[7] Documents relating to the FAS's program on nuclear non-proliferation can be found at http://www.fas.org.
[8] It does appear that Keating was aware of the substance, if not the details of the Stimson and FAS Reports and the evolution of the elimination debate overseas. In his statement to the inaugural meeting of the Canberra Commission, Keating argued that "Many ideas for a nuclear weapons-free world are on the table, but there has never before been a government sponsored exercise to develop a comprehensive and practical approach to the problem." (Keating 1996).

50th anniversary celebrations on 24 October 1995; others included Australia's submission to the International Court of Justice on the question of the legality of nuclear weapons, and the leadership of the regional campaign against the French and Chinese tests (*The Australian* 25 October 1995). Only after the makeup of the Commission was announced in late November 1995 did the proposal begin to receive greater attention. The expertise and general standing of the individual Commissioners was a key component of the Commission's status. Included among the group of seventeen were former prime ministers, ambassadors, academics and civilian and military leaders. Acknowledging the fact that the Commission needed both an immediate and longer-term focus, two of the most important Commissioners had been part of the US military establishment: General Lee Butler, former Commander in Chief of the US Strategic Air Command; and Robert McNamara, former US Secretary for Defense. The choice was deliberate. The Keating government recognised that if the Report was to have any impact at all, it first would need to be incorporated positively into the arms control and disarmament debates in Washington (Evans 1996: 1).

The Canberra Commission initiative was qualitatively different from previous efforts to progress the issue of nuclear weapons elimination. It was the first time that a Western ally of the United States, and one that was aligned with the US nuclear infrastructure, had attempted to develop a serious agenda for nuclear weapons elimination. In a press conference following the first meeting of the Commission in January 1995, Foreign Minister Gareth Evans argued that the Commission's Report would have far greater impact than previous reports or statements on nuclear disarmament because it would be "the product of a government initiative, government sponsored, and [would] be presented by a government to the other governments of the world" (Evans 1996: 4). The Labor government indicated that it would seek to have the Commission's Report incorporated into the work of both the General Assembly as well as the Geneva-based Conference on Disarmament (Keating 1996). The findings of the Commission therefore, were expected to carry more weight than either the existing reports from various private think tanks or the resolutions of the non-aligned movement in the UN which had repeatedly sought to put pressure on the nuclear weapon states (NWS) to disarm. This clear sense of ownership was crucial to understanding the (then) government's intention of exploiting the Canberra Commission's findings at the international level.

Following a series of four meetings – two in Australia and one each in the United States and Austria – the Commission submitted its Report to the Australian government in August 1996. In essence, the Report refutes the strategic, technological and political arguments against nuclear elimination in a comprehensive and detailed manner (see Hanson & Ungerer 1998). Convinced of the need to move towards a position of zero nuclear weapons, the Commissioners came up with a number of recommendations to achieve that goal. The first requirement, the Report argued, was that the NWS should make an unequivocal commitment to a nuclear weapons free world and agree to take immediate steps to negotiate that outcome. The Report then suggested a series of practical steps that could be taken by the NWS: de-alerting nuclear forces;

removal of warheads from delivery systems; ending deployment of non-strategic weapons; ending nuclear testing; progressing the US-Russia bilateral arms reduction talks; and a no-first-use agreement by the NWS towards the non-nuclear weapon states (NNWS) (*Report* 1996: 11). The most contentious issue, and one that produced the most debate inside the Commission's meetings, was the question of stipulating a timetable for the elimination of nuclear weapons. After lengthy debate, the Commissioners elected not to recommend a precise timetable. The lack of an agreed timetable by the NWS in terms of meeting their pledge under Article VI of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) had become one of the main sticking points in negotiations between the NWS and the non-aligned movement (led by India) in the CD. Yet any suggestion of a timed program towards elimination would have tainted the Commission's Report in the eyes of the NWS. The Commissioners therefore opted for a step-by-step program of phased elimination objectives that would be negotiated "at the earliest possible time" (*Report* 1996:15).

From Canberra to Tokyo: Tracing the Canberra Commission Report

Despite the fact that the new Coalition government did not seek to have the Report adopted formally as a resolution at the UN General Assembly (UNGA) meeting in September 1996, the initial international reaction to the Commission's work was positive. Among the delegations that made reference to the Canberra Commission in statements in the general debate of the First Committee at UNGA 51, members of the NAM used the Report to back calls for further discussion on nuclear disarmament. As expected, India endorsed the Commission's finding in favour of moving towards nuclear elimination 'at the earliest possible time'. Among the rest of the non-aligned group, leading states such as Indonesia, Egypt and Pakistan referred positively to the Report in their statements to the General Assembly. Reflecting the general consensus surrounding the Report in the UN, it was suggested that the Report "could form the basis of negotiations for the complete elimination of nuclear weapons".[9] Perhaps most importantly, the United States agreed, describing the Report as "defining the path ahead for nuclear disarmament".[10] For one brief moment it appeared as though the views of both the NWS states and the NNWS (represented by the US and India respectively) had converged around the compelling and unambiguous arguments laid down by the Canberra Commission, and it seemed that the Report might indeed form the basis of a reconciliation between the two sides of one of the longest-running sores in international politics, namely the asymmetrical bargain of the NPT.[11]

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[9] Statement by the Indonesian Delegate, , to the First Committee of the UN General Assembly 51st Session, New York, 1996.

[10] Statement by the US Delegate, , to the First Committee of the UN General Assembly 51st Session, New York, 1996.

[11] The NPT "bargain" refers to the two sets of commitments in the Treaty: non-nuclear weapon states agreed in 1968 not to receive, transfer or manufacture nuclear weapons in return for the pledge given by the nuclear powers to assist with the peaceful uses of nuclear energy and to pursue negotiations in 'good faith' towards general and complete disarmament. That the NNWS have fulfilled their commitments while the NWS have not moved seriously towards disarmament, thus perpetuating a culture of nuclear 'haves' and 'have nots', has led critics to label this bargain 'asymmetric' and unequal.

Yet states' representatives at the UNGA were faced with an unusual conundrum: while the Commission's Report enjoyed considerable international support as a pre-eminent statement on nuclear elimination, the fact that Australia, the sponsoring government, was not prepared to have it adopted in the work of the UN left other governments wondering what to do next. It was suggested at the time that another state, (perhaps Japan or Sweden), might consider taking up where Australia left off, and continue to promote the Commission's work in various UN forums (McNamara 1996). But no state would want to pick up the pieces of another state's handiwork. The result was that the Commission's Report missed the one opportunity to establish the agenda on elimination at the international political level in a forceful and effective way.

The Australian government's disinclination to provide appropriate support and impetus for the Report was implied in Foreign Minister Downer's speech to the Conference on Disarmament in January 1997. After listing the Report's various recommendations, Downer merely urged the CD to give the Report 'careful consideration' and hoped that it would 'stimulate international thinking and discussion' (Downer 1997a). Reflecting the Coalition's arms-length approach to the entire initiative, his speech did not contain any specific proposals for how each of the Report's recommendations might be progressed. Under different circumstances, it might have been expected that the sponsoring government would have had the Report adopted as a document of the Conference and used it as the basis for a resolution calling for the establishment of a committee to discuss nuclear weapons elimination. In the end, the Australian government did neither. In response to criticisms of his handling of the Report, the Foreign Minister argued that it had indeed received adequate support by the new government (Downer 1997b). Nevertheless, what the Australian government failed to emphasise with sufficient gusto was the Report's clear warning that unless steps were taken to adopt a program of phased and verifiable nuclear weapons elimination, further proliferation and nuclear terrorism were likely.

In spite of its unpromising start however, the Report continued to feature prominently in multilateral disarmament debates in the months after its release. As the negotiations shifted from the General Assembly in New York to the CD in Geneva in early 1997, advocacy of the Report's findings was taken up by other prominent 'middle powers'. In particular, Austria, Sweden and Brazil all used the Report to call for greater consideration of nuclear weapons elimination in the context of the CD agenda (Conference on Disarmament, CD/PV.755; CD/PV760; CD/PV.759). Echoing the earlier comments by the US, the Swedish Foreign Minister argued that, "(t)he importance of the Commission's Report is that it sets out a way forward through a series of concrete measures towards a nuclear-weapons-free world" (Conference on Disarmament, CD/PV.759) Convinced of its comprehensive program for action, and recognising the significance of the Report's clear warning of further proliferation pressures, Sweden and Brazil were among the leading states calling for the CD to take immediate steps to have the Canberra Commission Report form the basis of future negotiations concerning nuclear disarmament. Most delegations focused on

those areas where the Report's recommendations intersected with the CD's existing work programme. The key issue here was the Report's recommendation that, among a number of reinforcing steps needed to move towards complete elimination, the international community should start negotiations towards a ban on the production of fissile material for nuclear explosive purposes. A proposed convention on fissile material has been part of the CD deliberations for a number of years. However, the broad international consensus on the need for an international treaty to deal with fissile material had not been matched by any tangible progress towards that goal in the CD. [12]What some CD delegates suggested was that the Report gave further weight and force to the argument that a fissile material treaty would have a positive and reinforcing effect on the steps needed towards nuclear elimination.

Yet behind the Australian government's limited advocacy of the Report's findings lay a deeper problem in the international disarmament negotiations which served further to undermine the Report's impact. In the months following the recommencement of the CD negotiations in January 1997, it became clear that the CD had lapsed into a period of deadlock. Several non-aligned states party to the CD remained determined to hold all further multilateral disarmament negotiations tied to an explicit agreement by the NWS to commence negotiations on a time-bound nuclear disarmament convention. For its part, the US State Department was incensed that the international community could devour the recently concluded CTBT and then, like Oliver Twist, immediately ask for more. [13] Senior Washington observers acknowledged that further US agreement on nuclear disarmament was unlikely given the conservative and domestically focused nature of the Congress (Cerniello 1997). In the rush to do nothing, those initial statements welcoming the Report by both the US and India in New York were quickly forgotten in the tense, drawn-out negotiations of the CD. Neither the NWS or the NNWS were prepared to make sufficient compromise on the issue. So while the Australian Government's promotion of the Report was less than ideal, the international negotiating climate by 1997 had shifted anyway and contributed to the perception that the Canberra Commission Report would be left to wither on the vine (Leaver 1998).

Yet a closer reading of the events over the last twelve months suggests a different path for the Canberra Commission. Early critics of the initiative did not predict the extent to which the Commission's Report would continue to underwrite much of the nuclear elimination debate even after it faded from domestic and international attention. The Report's recommendations were incorporated into a number of other international statements and reports throughout the first half of 1997. Among the most significant activities undertaken during this period were the release of the final Stimson Center Steering Committee Report, *An American Legacy: Building a Nuclear Free World* (March 1997), and the report of the Committee on

[12] We note that in August 1998 the CD finally agreed to start negotiations on a fissile material 'cut-off' treaty, with the establishment of an *ad hoc* committee under Canadian Ambassador Mark Maher

[13] Many US officials believed that they had, through START I and II and the CTBT, conceded enough to the disarmament cause. They nevertheless appeared to underestimate international demands for even greater moves towards elimination. (Interviews, US State Department, Washington D.C., 9 July 1998)

International Security and Arms Control of the National Academy of Sciences, *The Future of US Nuclear Weapons Policy* (June 1997)[14]. Both acknowledged the work of the Canberra Commission as instrumental in laying the groundwork for the elimination debate in the US. Likewise, the Final Report of the Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict, also noted the significance of the Canberra Commission's findings (Carnegie Commission 1997).

The primary burden of promoting the Report itself in the US, however, fell on the individual Commissioners. Prominent among them were the efforts of General Lee Butler and Robert McNamara, both of whom adopted the role that, under different circumstances, the Australian government might have been expected to play. Lee Butler was the most active of the Commissioners in terms of publicising the Report's arguments to a Washington audience. Butler and Andrew Goodpaster[15], both retired US Generals, issued a statement on 5 December 1996 in association with 61 other retired military officials from around the world arguing for the elimination of nuclear weapons. Given the status of the individuals involved, (Butler, as noted, was former Commander-in-Chief of the US Strategic Air Command and Goodpaster a former Supreme Allied Commander in Europe), the statement received a high media profile. Butler followed this initiative up with a similar statement from over 100 civilian leaders in February 1998 (*Washington Post*, 2 February 1998: A15). Both statements nominated the Canberra Commission as the most notable study on the objective of a nuclear free world[16].

Other Commissioners also used their international profile to promote the Commission's findings. Field Marshall Lord Carver, former Chief of the Defence Staff in the United Kingdom, wrote an article in October 1996 in which he set out the principal arguments of the Report and the means by which the individual Commissioners had arrived at a consensus (Carver 1996). Carver, who claimed he was unconvinced of arguments in favour of complete elimination before the Commission was established, argued that "discussion with fellow Commissioners not only convinced me [to accept the goal of total elimination], but of its feasibility, and that a 'window of opportunity' existed in the absence of any serious tension between the major powers" (Carver 1996: 52).

The convenor of the Canberra Commission, Australia's Richard Butler, sought to place even further pressure on the nuclear weapons states. In a press interview in New York in April 1997, Butler was critical of a statement made by the five existing NWS in which they reaffirmed their commitment to the eventual elimination of nuclear weapons but which did not, he noted, go far enough in actually commencing steps

[14] The Stimson Center report can be viewed at [http://www.stimson.org/legacy]. The National Academy of Science report can be found at [http://www.nas.edu/readingroom/books/fun].
[15] In addition to his work with Butler, Goodpaster chaired the Stimson Center's Steering Committee on Nuclear Weapons Elimination.
[16] Both the Statement on Nuclear Weapons by the International Generals and Admirals (5 December 1996) and the Statement by International Civilian Leaders are part of the Nuclear Elimination Project at the State of the World Forum. For the full text of both statements, see [http://www.worldforum.org/initiatives].

towards elimination (Stewart 1997: 28). Perhaps reflecting on the increasing signs of malaise in arms control efforts at the time, Butler urged the NWS, and the US and Russia in particular, to give careful consideration to the Canberra Commission's recommendations and take immediate steps to fulfill their disarmament pledges.

By the end of 1997, disillusionment in the CD and in wider disarmament circles was well entrenched: the 'great frustration' in arms control negotiations had set in. A hardening of attitudes in Russia, the Middle East and South Asia all served to dampen any residual enthusiasm for the elimination cause among both the declared and undeclared nuclear weapons states. The Clinton administration was focused increasingly on domestic matters and showed no inclination of adopting a leading role in the disarmament debate. Effectively, there was little indication from the NWS during this period that showed the slightest hint of meeting their stated commitment to disarm. It seems odd therefore, that the series of nuclear tests in India and Pakistan in May 1998 should have come as such a great shock to the international community. Particularly in light of these states' negotiating stance in the CD throughout 1997, the history of nuclear policy statements by both countries on the need for a 'Hindu' and a 'Muslim' bomb respectively (see Walker 1998; Graham 1998; Boese 1998), and the election of the BJP Government in India in 1998, the tests seem, in retrospect, hardly surprising. A major part of the frustration felt by the international community was the feeling that the successful period of arms control advances evident since the late 1980s had ended and that future victories would be hard won, if at all. Added to this was the increasing speculation surrounding the future of the CD itself as the main disarmament forum (Goldblat 1997; Johnson 1997).

Taken together, these external shocks to the arms control regime, particularly the proliferation in South Asia, forced a serious rethink among states as to what steps could now be taken to arrest the declining optimism for nuclear weapons elimination. The US Arms Control and Disarmament Agency (ACDA), itself under the spotlight of domestic political infighting, was tasked with framing possible responses to the South Asian tests in the summer of 1998. One of the first steps ACDA took was to request from the Australian government through the Embassy in Washington another 50 copies of the Canberra Commission Report and its associated Background Papers. Despite this step, the absence of any real leadership from the US in the wake of the challenge posed to the nuclear non-proliferation regime by the South Asian tests has opened another opportunity for middle powers to play a role in moving the elimination debate forward. Two recent initiatives, drawing on the Canberra Commission in both style and substance, have been at the forefront of the international community's response to the tests. The first was the Eight Nation Initiative at the UN in New York; the second was the Tokyo Forum on Nuclear Proliferation and Disarmament which commenced in August 1998. Both initiatives are still in progress, making a definitive assessment of their impact difficult. It is possible however, to highlight some of the salient aspects of both initiatives in terms of continuing the arguments originally laid down by the Canberra Commission's Report in 1996.

The Eight-Nation Initiative

In a letter dated 9 June 1998, an eight-nation group calling itself the New Agenda Coalition, consisting of Brazil, Egypt, Ireland, Mexico, New Zealand, Slovenia, South Africa and Sweden, submitted a letter to the UN Secretary-General calling for all nuclear weapons states to undertake general and complete disarmament (UNGA A/53/138). The initiative was interesting for two main reasons. The first was authorship. While it has been presented as the collective exercise of a number of prominent middle powers, the Eight-Nation Initiative was predominantly the product of Ireland's recently self-appointed stewardship of the nuclear elimination issue in the General Assembly. Along with New Zealand, Ireland has been among the most active co-sponsoring states in the elimination debates in the UN system. The Irish government drafted the letter and sought to have a number of like-minded states sign the document. Importantly, as evidence of Australia's declining status in arms control matters – in part a function of its handling of the Canberra Commission's Report – the Australian government was not invited to be included among the signatories to the letter.

The second aspect of the initiative worth noting is the overwhelming intellectual debt it owes to the Canberra Commission Report. The second paragraph of the Eight Nation letter reads, "(w)e fully share the conclusion expressed by the commissioners of the Canberra Commission that 'the proposition that nuclear weapons can be retained in perpetuity and never used…defies credibility'" (UNGA A/53/138). For the most part, the rest of the letter is a restatement of the Canberra Commission's main recommendations (a cut-off convention; no-first-use agreements; and support for nuclear weapons free zones). Like the Canberra Commission's Report, the letter places the responsibility for the dangers of further proliferation squarely on the shoulders of the nuclear weapon states. It suggests that "the persistent reluctance of the nuclear-weapon States to approach their treaty obligations as an urgent commitment to the total elimination of their nuclear weapons" is the key impediment to a nuclear-weapon-free world (UNGA A/53/138). Unlike the Canberra Commission however, the Eight-Nation Initiative is more direct on the question of a legally-binding instrument for nuclear elimination – the proposed Nuclear Weapons Treaty. In line with previous NAM statements in the CD, the letter advocates the immediate negotiation of a universal legal instrument or set of instruments for the elimination of nuclear weapons, thus bringing nuclear weapons into line with the other two weapons of mass destruction, chemical and biological weapons, the possession or use of which have now been outlawed.

The Tokyo Forum

The second major 'middle power' initiative following the nuclear tests in South Asia has been the Tokyo Forum on Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament. The Tokyo Forum, which emerged as a joint

initiative of the Japanese government, the Japan Institute of International Affairs and the Hiroshima Peace Institute, held its first meeting on 30-31 August 1998 (MOFA 1998a). In a press statement following the first meeting, the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs described it as akin to a Track II meeting with the 18 invited participants acting in their individual capacities and not necessarily representing the views of their own governments (MOFA 1998b). It was a similar formulation of words which had found its way into the Canberra Commission Report. In fact, the two initiatives are almost identical. The Forum's wider brief is to discuss nuclear disarmament issues on a global scale, although its chief focus concerns the proliferation threats following the Indian and Pakistani tests.

The Japanese government has indicated that the Tokyo Forum will meet three or four times over the next ten months with the aim of producing a final report by mid-1999. Among the 18 participants in the Tokyo Forum, four are former members of the Canberra Commission.[17] Other members include former diplomats, disarmament experts and academics. Unlike the Canberra Commission however, and reflecting the key focus on nuclear proliferation in South Asia, the membership includes representatives from both India and Pakistan. In these cases however, the distinction between the participants acting in their individual or official capacities is unclear. The Pakistani delegate, Nishat Ahmad, is currently a senior military official in Islamabad while the Indian representative, Jasjit Singh, is associated with an academic research institute whose research focus appears to be pro-defence rather than elimination.[18]

Thus while aspects of both the Eight-Nation Initiative and the Tokyo Forum appear encouraging in terms of promoting the agenda on nuclear weapons elimination, significant problems remain. The Eight-Nation Initiative is intentionally provocative towards the NWS and the US in particular. Certainly the letter's language on nuclear weapons elimination will have broad appeal among the non-aligned movement if, as expected, it is presented to the UNGA as a resolution. The NWS are unlikely to support such a confrontational resolution, one which, moreover, the NWS have had no part in formulating. This outcome will only serve to reinforce the divisions between the two sides of the nuclear elimination debate. The Tokyo Forum may suffer a similar fate but for different reasons. Already the Japanese government under Prime Minister Obuchi appears to have distanced itself from the Forum. (This is despite the fact that it was Obuchi himself, as Foreign Minister, who led the proposal.) In the midst of an ongoing financial crisis in Japan, and also because of Japan's sensitivities towards the US alliance, the Japanese government is unlikely to give the Forum the due political sponsorship it requires to have the necessary impact on the NWS. There are also relatively few Secretariat resources committed to the process. Moreover, the membership of the Forum, while attempting to build a constructive dialogue between India and Pakistan, is unlikely to deliver the sort of consensus that was found in the Canberra Commission. For these reasons,

[17] They are Ambassador Rolf Ekeus, Ambassador Ryukichi Imai, Professor Robert O'Neill, and Ambassador Qian Jiadong.
[18] See for example the recent papers published by the Institute for Defense Studies and Analyses, New Delhi [http://www.idsa-india.org].

these two latest 'middle power' initiatives may not produce the kind of comprehensive program for action which the Canberra Commission was able to do.

Ultimately, it is the fact that the Report does what no other document has done that is its strength. No other systematic attempt has been made to assess the threat and the utility of nuclear weapons in a global context, to address the fears of critics of elimination and to come up with a phased program of elimination in which the security interests of the NWS are taken into account and accommodated within a credible and respected framework. For these reasons, the Canberra Commission's Report remains arguably the best placed of initiatives to further the twin goals of non-proliferation and nuclear elimination.

Conclusion: A Second Chance for the Canberra Commission?

The Canberra Commission's Report then has not been inconsequential in its impact on the nuclear arms control debate. Despite the obstacles it faced, it has remained a focus of the broader elimination issue since it was released in 1996. At present, there are two possible futures for the Report: it can remain a statement of existing principles and arguments on steps needed towards elimination, a statement which is well-regarded but nevertheless has little impact in terms of forcing thinking on actual implementation. Beyond this, there is the possibility that the Canberra Commission initiative can, through its resurrection and with active political sponsorship on the part of the Australian government, be given another chance to shift the international policy focus towards nuclear weapons elimination. The final part of this paper makes the case for reconvening the Commission, albeit in a changed form.

Although originally a product of the Keating government, there is no reason why the Commission should not be supported by the present government, reflecting the traditional bipartisan approach to arms control issues in Australia. In the aftermath of the Indian and Pakistani tests, there is greater need than before to publicise further the Commission's original findings. One course would be to reconvene the Commission, possibly as a more permanent body sponsored by Australia and tasked to find ways of implementing the steps in the Report, but also to consider what practical measures might now be taken to address the urgent question of horizontal proliferation. A more permanent Canberra Commission institution might well comprise an entirely new membership to address structural changes in the international environment of the late 1990s. A bold initiative may see the reconstituted Commission tasked with the job of preparing a draft of a Nuclear Weapons Treaty, to be handed to the CD as a Working Document, in which a suitably lengthy period of time is given for the nuclear weapons states to move to elimination. A time-frame of, say, 2045, to coincide with the 100 years of nuclear weapons' existence may be sufficiently prolonged for the NWS but nevertheless satisfy NNWS demands for a clear timetable. It should be said here that the original Canberra Commission's decision *not* to be bound by a timeframe was probably correct at the time. Yet given that the Report is now established and generally well-regarded, and especially with the new threats of proliferation seen in 1998, the time may be ripe for proposing more rigorous measures than the 1996

Commission was able to do.

Any such reconvening of the Commission however, should be accompanied by a program of extensive and sustained support from the Australian government at the international level and the wide distribution and follow-up of the original Report and its Background Papers. Of course, reconvening and promoting the Commission will not, of itself, lead to elimination. But it *will* re-focus thinking on elimination. The changed nuclear environment of the late 1990s may well see political leaders more receptive to implementing the Commission's views now than they were in 1996. There is currently a search for the means by which the recent proliferation crisis can be contained. With this has come a begrudging acceptance (although it is rarely stated outright by the political leaders of the NWS) that any such containment measures will also have to consider the issue of elimination, and that non-proliferation and disarmament are two sides of the same coin. In this sense, any renewed interest shown by the US towards the Canberra Commission should be fully exploited. Australia has generally enjoyed a good reputation for pursuing arms control (notwithstanding the Coalition government's lack of enthusiasm for the Report), and can do this through innovative diplomacy as well as by pursuing negotiations in traditional forums. Its role will be a difficult one, with its diplomatic efforts dependent on the extent to which it is able and willing to bridge the gap between the interests of the existing nuclear powers and the non-nuclear states. It will need to balance its support for the Western alliance system with calls for reform of international disarmament institutions and practices more in favour of small and middle-sized states. Increasingly however, these two goals are becoming more closely related. Nuclear proliferation, whether it be in India, Pakistan, North Korea, Iraq or elsewhere represents serious disruption to the stability of the entire international system and threatens to make the existing security order more confrontational and unstable. This is clearly not in the interests of the major powers.

Many of the arms control agreements reached in the 'great advance' had been assisted by the active efforts of Australia from the 1980s onwards. In this regard, the tests on the subcontinent, indeed the general lack of progress in arms control issues recently, represents a significant setback to Australian arms control diplomacy and challenges the Australian position which has long advocated a strong non-proliferation regime. It seems essential therefore, to consider ways in which the political and strategic repercussions of the tests can be addressed and how the Australian government's objectives can be furthered in light of these disruptions. Australia faces an exceptional opportunity to move international arms control efforts forwards by pursuing a program of constructive diplomacy. A firm commitment to the Canberra Commission would be a good place to start.

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